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ABSTRACT

Upon arrival in the United States, the Southeast Asian "Boat People" faced a multitude of problems that would seem to have hindered their achieving economic self-sufficiency. Nonetheless, by the time of a 1982 research study which interviewed nearly 1,400 refugee households, 25 percent of all the households in the sample had achieved economic independence. The relative success of these immigrants is attributed to their own resourcefulness. Apart from site of settlement, all the strong predictors of progress were individual and familial characteristics, including: length of time in the United States, fluency of English, number of employable adults in the household, and (somewhat less strongly) education and past occupation. In a separate series of analyses from this study, the academic achievement of approximately 350 school-aged children was investigated. After an average of just 3 years in this country, these children were found to be doing extremely well in school. Achievement was highest in children with families that embodied traditional Confucian cultural values, in which parents read to their children, and in which two parents played equal roles in decisionmaking. To further improve the lives of the Southeast Asian refugees, the researchers recommend: more frequent and more accessible employment counseling and training; childcare services that will better enable adults (especially women) to enter the labor force, and a strong, well-defined national service and policy for resettlement. (KH)

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WORKING TOWARD SELF-SUFFICIENCY

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Working toward Self-sufficiency

ISR's study of 1,400 Southeast Asian refugee households reveals remarkable progress against seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

They were known as "the Boat People"—a second, post-1975 wave of refugees who left Southeast Asia a few years after the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam. Their subsequent plight as homeless refugees, literally adrift at sea, became an international issue.

Their circumstances contrasted sharply with those of the first wave of Southeast Asian refugees, who had left their homeland along with departing American forces and who represented the more privileged and better-educated military and professional classes.

Odds against Them

The Boat People had been farmers, fishers, craftspeople, students, and laborers in Southeast Asia. Arriving with little or no savings or other resources, little or no command of English, and few transferable labor market skills, those who reached the United States also faced a severely depressed national economy. The obstacles to their achieving self-sufficient lives in this country seemed insurmountable.

"And yet," says ISR researcher Nathan Caplan, "considering their hardships and all the odds against them, this group of immigrants has in fact demonstrated remarkable progress."

Caplan, in association with John K. Whitmore and with the assistance of Quang Bui and Marcella Trautmann, directed a three-year study of Southeast Asian refugees now living in the United States. He emphasizes the bleak poverty in which these refugees spent their initial months in this country as he reports the clear signs that they are now rapidly emerging toward economic self-sufficiency. "Although a great proportion are still at or below the federally defined poverty level and many still rely on some form of public assistance," says Caplan, "a stunning proportion of these families are climbing out of deep poverty—largely through an impressive demonstration of hard work and initiative."

During the summer and fall of 1982, interviews were conducted with almost 1,400 refugee households in Houston, Chicago, Boston, Seattle, and Orange County, California—five primary areas for the resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees in the United States. These sites, and the refugee households within them, were identified through a combination of area probability sampling and the use of lists provided to the project by resettlement and program service agencies. The U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), together with the Office of the Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, funded by the study as a means of assessing both national and regional refugee resettlement policies and programs.

Nathan Caplan

Because the sample population included three different ethnic groups (50 percent were Vietnamese, 30 percent were Laotian, and 20 percent were Chinese Vietnamese), interviewers from these three ethnic groups were recruited to administer the face-to-face interviews using a unique, tri-lingual questionnaire.

The magnitude of the difficulties the refugees faced in seeking to settle and survive in this country can be inferred from a statistical description of some of the group's characteristics. Barely one in four (26 percent) had completed a high school education, and one in two (52 percent) had only primary school or less education. Only about one in a hundred spoke English fluently upon arrival in the U.S.; two out of three had arrived with no knowledge of the language.

And yet, at the time of interviewing, 25

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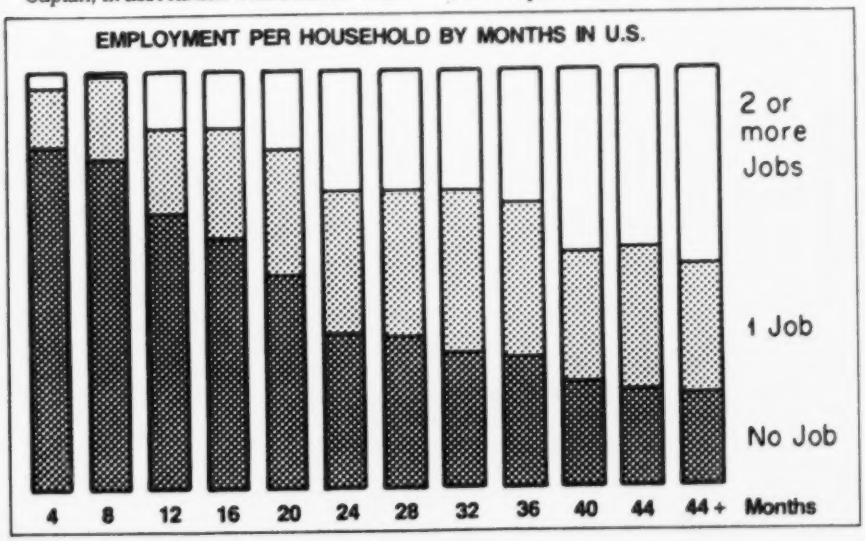

Few of the refugee children knew any English when they arrived in the U.S., but just three years later they were demonstrating outstanding scholastic achievement.

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percent of all the households in the sample had achieved economic independence. Not all of these, however, had incomes at or above the federal poverty standard. Sixteen percent of the households were economically independent with incomes at or above the poverty level, and in this limited sense could be considered to have achieved economic self-sufficiency. The refugees who were living entirely on their own incomes and were no longer receiving Refugee Cash Assistance or other public assistance had been in the U.S. an average of only 32 months.

Nearly nine out of ten of the sample households reported that at least one household member was employed, and, for individuals, unemployment ranged from a high of 86 percent during the first four months in the U.S. to a low of 19 percent by the 44th month. More than three-quarters of the employed refugees held full-time jobs (35 or more hours per week) at the time of interviewing.

Own Resourcefulness

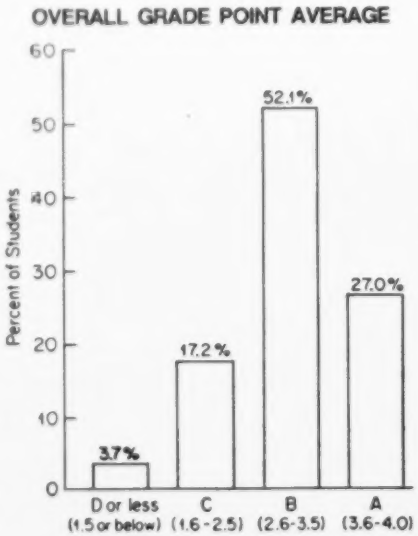
"The success these people have realized is almost entirely a result of their own resourcefulness," Caplan emphasizes, noting that, with some exceptions, refugee resettlement agencies and programs appear to have been of limited help to the immigrants. The study found that attainment of economic self-sufficiency was only weakly related to either the kind of volunteer agency that handled resettlement for the refugees or the kind of sponsorship they had.

While three-quarters of the refugees were attending classes in English, such participation showed a much weaker relationship to acquisition of English skills than did age, sex, past occupation, or education.

Employment services, on-the-job training, and vocational education also showed only moderate relationships to the refugees' employment status, largely because so few of the refugees had access to employment-related programs. Of the employed respondents, 60 percent had found their jobs exclusively through the help of friends or relatives.

Low-Status Jobs

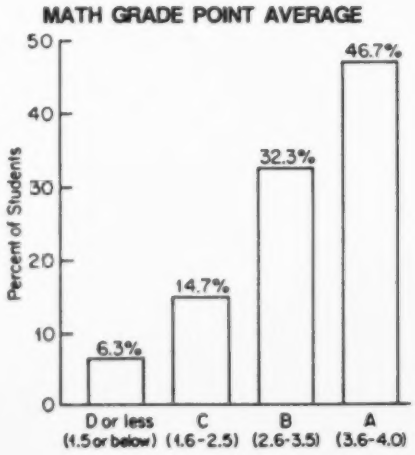
When the survey was conducted, two-thirds of the sample households were receiving some form of public assistance, 45 percent of the households had no earned income, and half of the households were at or below federal poverty standards. The average hourly wage among the employed refugees was $5.20. A pronounced majority of the employed refugees held low-status jobs (69 percent, according to the Duncan Socio-Economic Index), with only 11 percent in high-status jobs. In addition, more than half of the working refugees (53 percent) held jobs in the peripheral sectors of the labor market, where jobs tend to be unstable, declining in number, seasonal, and part-time. Their economic improvement resulted almost exclusively from increasing the number of household members



who entered the workforce, rather than from improvement in job quality or benefits at the individual level.

Academic Achievement

With one exception—site of settlement in the U.S.—all the strong predictors of progress toward being self-supporting were individual and familial characteristics, rather than external factors or programs. These predictors included length of time in the U.S., fluency in English, number of employable adults in the household, and—somewhat less strongly—education and past occupation. Refugees who located in sites such as Houston, where more jobs and fewer public support services were available, moved more quickly toward economic viability.



No significant ethnic differences emerged on resettlement success measures among the three ethnic groups in the sample.

In a separate series of analyses from this study, Caplan and his colleagues investigated the academic achievement of approximately 350 school-aged children from the sample of refugee families. All of the children had arrived in the U.S. after October 1978; most of them spoke *no* English upon arrival here. Yet, after an average of just three years in this country, these children were doing extremely well in school.

On national standardized tests of academic achievement, 27 percent of the refugee children scored in the 90th percentile on math achievement—almost three times better than the national average. And although they scored somewhat lower than the national average in English language proficiency, they outperformed their school-aged peers on general grade-

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Southeast Asian Refugees

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point average, with 27 percent earning A or A-minus.

A multivariate analysis of attitude and background characteristics revealed the factors that were significantly linked to scholastic success. The highest-achieving children were from families that embodied what are traditional Confucian cultural values, emphasizing the family as a cohesive unit working to achieve shared goals, and encouraging a strong respect for education and for the family's cultural traditions and history.

Achievement was also highest among children from families in which parents read to their children—and it made no difference whether they read in English or in their native language. Higher achievement was also associated with greater equality between the two parents in family influence and decision making.

The families in this study represent but a fraction of the estimated 650,000 Southeast Asians in this country who still face serious barriers to socioeconomic well-being, according to Caplan. English language instruction is sorely needed in the camps where refugees await resettlement.

At present, the women refugees are often excluded from English classes in the camps, and their language handicap is largely responsible for the fact that they fall behind the men in terms of employment, kinds of jobs held, income, job training participation, and other indicators of upward economic movement. Men and women with equal English fluency did not differ in the time necessary to find employment or in the quality of the jobs held.

The refugee study has pointed to several prominent areas, in addition to language training, that could greatly benefit from improvement in services to such immigrant groups, Caplan says. Among the researchers' recommendations have been: more frequent and more accessible employment counseling and training; childcare services that will better enable adults—especially women—to enter the labor force; and a strong, well-defined national service and policy for resettlement of refugees to eliminate site-by-site variation and program abuse. □

For more information about this study, contact Nathan Caplan at the Institute.